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A NOTE ON MAETERLINCK

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

Le Trésor des Humbles is in some respects the most important, as it is certainly the most purely beautiful, of Maeterlinck's works. Limiting himself as he did in his plays to the rendering of certain sensations, and to the rendering of these in the most disembodied way possible, he did not permit himself to indulge either in the weight of wisdom or the adornment of beauty, each of which would have seemed to him (perhaps wrongly) as an intrusion. Those web-like plays, a very spider's work of filminess, allowed you to divine behind them one who was after all a philosopher rather than a playwright. The philosopher could but be divined; he was never seen. In these essays he has dropped the disguise of his many masks. Speaking without intermediary, he speaks more directly, with a more absolute abandonment of every convention of human reserve, except the reserve of an extreme fastidiousness in the choice of words simple enough and sincere enough to convey exactly his meaning, more spontaneously, it would seem, than any writer since Emerson. From Emerson he has certainly learnt much; he has found, for instance, the precise form in which to say what he has to say, in little essays, not, indeed, so disconnected as Emerson's, but with a like care to say something very definite in every sentence, so that that sentence might stand by itself, without its context, as something more than a mere part of a paragraph. But his philosophical system, though it has its essential links with the great mystical system which has developed itself through many manifestations, from Plotinus and Porphyry downwards, is very much his own, and owes little to anything but his own meditation; and whether his

subject is *La Beauté Intérieure*, or *Les Femmes*, *Les Avertis*, or *Le Tragique Quotidien*, it is with the same wisdom, certainty and beauty that he speaks. The book might well become the favorite reading of those persons to whom beauty must come with a certain dogmatism, if it is to be accepted for what it is. It reveals the inner life with a simplicity which would seem the most obvious if it were not the rarest of qualities. It denies nothing, but it asserts many things, and it asserts nothing which has not been really seen.

In the preface to the first volume of his "Théâtre," Maeterlinck takes us very simply into his confidence, and explains to us some of his intentions and some of his methods. He sees in *La Princesse Maleine* one quality, and one only: "*Une certaine harmonie épouvantée et sombre.*" The other plays, up to *Aglavaine et Sélysette*, "*présentent une humanité et des sentiments plus précis, en proie à des forces aussi inconnues, mais un peu mieux dessinées.*" These unknown forces, "*au fond desquelles on trouve l'idée de Dieu chrétien, mêlée à celle de la fatalité antique,*" are realized, for the most part, under the form of death. A fragile, suffering, ignorant humanity is represented struggling through a brief existence under the terror and apprehension of death. It is this conception of life which gives these plays their atmosphere, indeed their chief value. For, as we are rightly told, the primary element of poetry is "*l'idée que la poète se fait de l'inconnu dans lequel flottent les êtres et les choses qu'il évoque, du mystère qui les domine et les juge et qui préside à leurs destinées.*" This idea it no longer seems to him possible to represent honestly by the idea of death, and he asks: What is there to take its place?

"*Pour mon humble part, après les petits drames que j'ai énumérés plus haut, il m'a semblé loyal et sage d'écarter la mort de ce trône auquel il n'est pas certain qu'elle ait droit. Déjà, dans le dernier, que je n'ai pas nommé parmi les autres, dans 'Aglavaine et Sélysette,' j'aurais voulu qu'elle cédât à l'amour, à la sagesse ou au bonheur une part de sa puissance. Elle ne m'a pas obéi, et j'attends, avec la plupart des poètes de mon temps, qu'une autre force se révèle.*"

There is a fine and serious simplicity in these avowals, which show the intellectual honesty of Maeterlinck's dramatic work, its basis in philosophical thought. He is not

merely a playwright who has found a method, he is a thinker who has to express his own conception of the universe, and therefore concerns literature. He finds that conception changing, and, for the moment, he stands aside, waiting. "The man who never alters his opinion," said Blake, "is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind."

Aglavaine et Sélysette is the most beautiful play that Maeterlinck has yet written; it is as beautiful as *Le Trésor des Humbles*. Hitherto, in his dramatic prose, he has deliberately refrained from that explicit beauty of phrase which is to be found in almost every sentence of the essays. Implicit beauty there has been from the first, a beauty of reverie in what the close lips of his shadowy people say, afraid to do more than whisper a few vague words, mere hints of whatever dreams and thoughts had come to them out of the darkness. But of the elaborate beauty of the essays, in which an extreme simplicity becomes more ornate than any adornment, there has been, until now, almost nothing. In *Aglavaine et Sélysette* we have not merely beauty of conception and atmosphere, but writing which is beautiful in itself, and in which meditation achieves its own right to exist, not merely because it carries out that conception, or forms that atmosphere. And at the same time the very essence of the drama has been yet further spiritualized. Maeterlinck has always realized, better than anyone else, the significance, in life and art, of mystery. He has realized how unsearchable is the darkness out of which we have but just stepped, and the darkness into which we are about to pass. And he has realized how the thought and sense of that twofold darkness invade the little space of light in which, for a moment, we move; the depth to which they shadow our steps, even in that moment's partial escape. But in some of his plays he would seem to have apprehended this mystery as a thing merely or mainly terrifying—the actual physical darkness surrounding blind men, the actual physical approach of death as a stealthy intruder into our midst; he has shown us people huddled at a window, out of which they almost feared to look, or beating at a door, the opening of which they dreaded. Fear shivers through these plays, creeping across our nerves like a damp mist coiling up out of a valley. And there is beauty certainly in this "vague spiritual fear"; but certainly a lower kind of beauty than that which gives its supreme pathos to *Aglavaine et Sélysette*. Here is mystery which is also pure

beauty, in these delicate approaches of intellectual pathos, in which suffering and death and error become transformed into something almost happy, so full is it of strange lights.

And, with this spiritualizing of the very substance of what had always been so fully a drama of things unseen, there comes, as we have said, a freer abandonment to the instinctive desire of the artist to write beautifully. Having realized that one need not be afraid of beauty, he is not afraid to let soul speak to soul in language worthy of both. And, curiously, at the same time he becomes more familiar, more human. *Sélysette* is quite the most natural character that Maeterlinck has ever drawn, as *Aglavaine* is the most noble. *Méléandre* is, perhaps, more shadowy than ever, but that is because he is deliberately subordinated in the composition, which is concerned only with the action upon one another of the two women. He suffers the action of these forces, does not himself act; standing between them as man stands between the calling of the intellectual and the emotional life, between the simplicity of daily existence, in which he is good, affectionate, happy, and the perhaps "immoral" heightening of that existence which is somewhat disastrously possible in the achievement of his dreams. In this play, which touches so beautifully and so profoundly on so many questions, this eternal question is restated; of course, not answered. To answer it would be to find the missing word in the great enigma; and to Maeterlinck, who can believe in nothing which is not mystery, it is of the essence of his philosophy not to answer his own question.

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